

Skepticism, Experience, and Science

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Essay

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American Mind



The crisis of modern liberalism and science requires skeptical political philosophy—but skeptical political philosophy is itself undergoing a crisis.

Modern liberalism and modern science are two sides of the same coin. Both are undergoing a crisis, intellectual as well as practical. Both need to be rescued and revised.

The Crisis of Liberalism and Science

There is a single discipline that can do so: the skeptical political philosophy that originated with Plato and Aristotle, and was recovered in the 20th century by scholars such as Eric Voegelin, Jacob Klein, and, most influentially, Leo Strauss.^[1] But the current scholars of this classical philosophy are lost in minutia, fixated on the contingent lessons of a long-dead teacher, and unaware of or indifferent to their responsibility. Should this discipline awaken, it will need to move quickly to repair its estranged relationship with both the natural sciences and metaphysics. In turn, the sciences, above all physics and biology, need a reorientation that liberates them from modes of inquiry that have become dogmatisms—once productive premises that now stifle and distort empirical inquiry.

Enlightenment liberalism originated with Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, who sought to devise laws of politics to overcome the doctrines of scholastic thought, and to establish a firm basis of peace and political order through artfully devised institutions, or, as Machiavelli put it, “new modes and orders.” The modern scientific revolution originated with Francis Bacon and René Descartes, and sought to master the world technologically through measurement and mathematics, free of speculative metaphysics. Both efforts, inaugurated some 400 years ago, were driven by one impulse: to bring the natural world, including mankind, under control by reducing all phenomena—including political phenomena—to their material components. Thus sorted and quantified, every body and everybody could be controlled using the newly derived laws of nature, mathematical and social.

The success of this joint effort, which has brought the world ever increasing technological achievement combined with declining political understanding, is difficult to

quantify. But the assumptions underlying materialism's efforts, so long papered over by the breathtaking advances of machines and medicines, have always been problematic. The marriage between the scientific and political revolutions is not a match made in a heaven. The difficulty, however, rests not with the union but the vows. In place of love and honor, this dynastic pair swore forever the dominion of a purposeless world.^[2] Over the last century and a half, liberalism and science have denied that any inherent purpose or order exists in nature and human beings except that which our arbitrary will imposes on ourselves and the whole, all while giving us increasing power over the material world.

These matters are increasingly relevant, even urgent, because numerous signs indicate that the scientific and political revolutions that have shaped our world are faltering. To name a few relevant trends in modern science: climate change research has become so politicized there has been almost irreparable loss of public trust. In theoretical physics, the most fundamental of all the natural sciences, the near-complete research standstill for several years has led to an erosion of trust even among its own members. In applied science, a growing gap is emerging between technological capability and ethical guidelines. Enormous moral and political questions—for which society seems utterly unprepared—are being raised by genomics, artificial intelligence, and the underreported phenomenon of psychological manipulation in social media (it's not just the data; it's the dopamine). Advanced computer modeling is driving research in many fields to increasing artificiality, and even further away from classical causality, with purely mathematical models that are increasingly so complex as to elude—and seemingly dispense with—validation. In the social sciences, research is becoming hopelessly trivial, boring and irrelevant. Due to a combination of parochialism and unprofessionalism, it appears that many studies—across all fields—are not replicable and are probably wrong. Recent investigations have shown that several of the most iconic “discoveries” in modern psychology are probably false. There are momentous changes afoot across the globe which we cannot adequately grasp without understanding more than the Enlightenment can tell us.

Leo Strauss and the Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism

Let us return to how the current condition of classical political philosophy came to pass. Leo Strauss was born in Germany in 1899, initially studied mathematics and then philosophy with Edmund Husserl in Germany, and attended lectures by Martin Heidegger. Fleeing Nazi Germany, he eventually arrived in the United States and taught at a variety of colleges, most notably the University of Chicago.

“The social scene that Strauss confronted was sure of several things: that the scientific enterprise was something distinct from philosophy; that its task was to explain actual behavior by close attention to facts and their causes or correlates; [and] that moral judgements had no proper place in the theory required to explain behavior.... Strauss questioned these certitudes and insisted on restoring political philosophy as the comprehensive social science.”^[3]

In the course of this effort, Strauss challenged the dominant orthodoxies of academia in ways that still reverberate.

“In much of the academy, historicism and positivism came to be taken as self-evident truths. That both imply moral relativism, which means that there is no rational basis for judgments about right and wrong, was seen by many of Strauss's colleagues in the university world as an important contribution to progress.”^[4]

To rehabilitate philosophy, Strauss chose themes that recur throughout his scholarship: the break between ancient and modern thought, the close reading of key texts which

often reveal subtle or concealed messages that writers obscured for fear of persecution, and the “problem” of natural right. For Plato and Aristotle, Strauss emphasized, the ground of justice could be found in the order and ends of the whole or universe; but this “cosmic teleology” had been upended by the success of modern science, according to which nature provides no information that can serve to advise politics.

Strauss spawned two, going on three, generations of students. Yet the success of the rebirth of classical rationalism is limited. Strauss’s peculiar approach—which served specific heuristic purposes—are themselves becoming dogma, and political philosophy would do well to return to its foundation: experience (*empeiria*), or in modern parlance, empirical data. For the ancients, direct sensory experience not only formed the ground of philosophy, but also its literal “reality check”; when philosophic propositions were persistently irreconcilable with experience, such propositions were reformed or abandoned. No release from this requirement can be found in refusing to look at the data, refusing, as it were, to experience experience. Nonetheless, a certain conventional wisdom of Straussian precepts—which seems to become more settled with each new generation—is in danger of displacing Strauss’ intention to promote skeptical inquiry. The superficial conclusions that we address in this essay concern the interpretation of his *provisional* statement that the *premises* of modern science lead to *opinions* that are antagonistic to classical rationalism.

Nature Strikes Back

In fact, the critique of Aristotelian physics by modern science is greatly overstated; and even if this were not the case, none of Newtonian, relativistic, or quantum mechanics have disposed of the possibility of natural right. As to the first point, Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli has noted in his essay “Aristotle’s Physics: A Physicists Look”^[5] that many of Aristotle’s insightful conclusions are valid observations within the domain of his experience: bodies moving in fluids (either atmosphere or water). As to the second point—a random, purposeless universe—there is the testimony of Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and other iconic physicists, who have pointed out that modern science does not refute cosmic teleology but simply as a methodological matter excludes it—or claims to. As applied, however, many scientific disciplines implicitly acknowledge that phenomena have different ends. Biological organisms clearly operate differently, with different functions and properties, than non-living phenomena. Moreover, each species flourishes and reaches its potential in its own way (i.e., has different specific ends), including human beings, who clearly have features that intelligibly separate them from termites or even bonobos—features one cannot confine to reproductive fitness other than by rigid dogma.

What many scientists deny, but what common sense immediately perceives, is that it is possible to speculate intelligently about these ends and to rank them. Indeed, it is certainly no less possible to speculate intelligently about the objective status of these ends than it is to speculate in physics about the objective status of strings, branes and supersymmetry in string theory (objects of mathematical argumentation but that to date have generally dodged experimental validation). Modern science inescapably, if reluctantly, recognizes principles of organization in biology and often lapses into this way of thinking, however unwittingly, even in cosmology. Particles become simple elemental atoms which form stars which, through fusion in stars, become heavier atoms which become molecules which molecules and elements become planets—which at least on one planet gives rise to increasingly complex life forms—all exhibiting tendencies or behaviors which can be described predictably, even amidst indeterminacy at the smallest (Planck length) levels.

The strange reluctance of many Straussians to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence

for such “emergent” order in evolutionary biology is particularly embarrassing, as it causes them to appear to be obscurantist allies of religious fundamentalists—a strange and unfair characterization, but not preposterous given the unfortunate way many choose to confront (or avoid) the physical record. To take one example, Harvey Mansfield—the eminent senior Straussian and Harvard professor—writes at some length about Darwin and evolution in his book, *Manliness* (2006). He objects indignantly to the idea, not because it is demonstrably or even arguably untrue as science, but because it promotes bad opinions about virtue. The theory of evolution, he laments, “undermined all eternities”; the manliness it promotes is “too primitive.” But is such an objection a serious rebuttal of experience? Mansfield claims to look closely at evolution’s “difficulties as science,” but he never mentions fossils or archaeology. Is he unfamiliar? He seems uninterested in the evidence, confining his argument to the library and neglecting entirely the museum and the laboratory. Nor is he alone. One subset of Straussians declines to reconcile itself to Darwin based on the separate but wrong-headed idea that the faults of American Progressivism can be laid predominantly at the feet of evolutionary biology.

To be sure, Aristotle’s biology does not survive Darwin’s discoveries wholly intact. Why should it? Aristotle’s experience, his data set, was limited to what could be observed using the rudimentary instruments and accumulated experience of his day. Aristotle would have doubtless come to different conclusions on particular matters based on a radically larger data set, and, while this would not necessarily invalidate conclusions grounded in data sets that were fundamentally complete—i.e., self-knowledge and common experience—abundant new facts would need to be intelligently addressed. A minority of Straussians have made the case for the compatibility of evolution and natural political claims, or natural right. Even Strauss’s friend and contemporary, Jacob Klein, observed in a memorable passage:

“Men generate men, cats generate cats, birds generate birds, fishes generate fishes. There are always young one playing about, and this quite independently of any possible evolution stretched out over an exceedingly long period of time.... This is what the word genesis implies: it means both coming to be and becoming; the things which are generated are all things to come.”

Just as Einstein’s relativity does not invalidate Newtonian mechanics at ordinarily experienced velocities, the pace of evolution does not necessarily dispel political propositions based a permanent human nature; indeed, just as Einsteinian relativity demands a permanent speed of light, *c*, rather than a permanent time and space, so evolution, far from dispelling the permanent features of humanity, invites renewed serious inquiry into the nature of life and its culmination in the uniquely human activity: thinking.^[6] But statements such as Klein’s, as well as books such as Roger Masters’ *The Nature of Politics* have failed, apparently, to convince Straussians that we should look for natural right in human biology; in the nature of the *zoon politikon*, rather than in the stars.

Classical Political Rationalism, Rightly Understood

This leads us to the method of classical political rationalism, which proceeds from opinions and speculatively examines those opinions by means of identifying contradictions to proceed by inductive reasoning to first principles and then to apply such principles to further observations. Classical philosophy is teleological because it allows that phenomena may fundamentally aim at some end and those ends can become objects of meaningful contemplation. Metaphysical understandings of being and becoming are the ground of the understanding of the whole, which inform the understanding of all phenomena, including political phenomena.

Harry V. Jaffa, one of Strauss's first students, captured the infant spirit of the application of Strauss's teaching in his study of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, *Crisis of the House Divided*. Jaffa's examined the problem of the American Civil War, familiarizing himself with historical data available in an extensive body of writing on Lincoln. That engagement with the data, the accumulated experience, led him to understand that Lincoln's debates with Douglas examined the organizing principles of the American regime along the lines by which Plato examined justice in the *Republic*. Using the recovered principles of classical rationalism, Jaffa wrote a history of the Lincoln-Douglas debates that revealed the truth of certain political phenomena.

Jaffa wrote on many topics but he was known to say that "The Miracle of the Common Noun" was the essay of which he was most proud. There is no doubt that the metaphysics Jaffa sketched out—while neither precisely Aristotle nor precisely Plato—were compatible with Lincoln's understanding of the Declaration of Independence, which depends on the understanding of the common noun "man" and its position in a whole (the universe) between the divine and the animals. There is no reason that the topics of modern science should be exempted from the examination Jaffa gave Lincoln. Indeed, Jaffa's own metaphysics beckon further understanding of man, animal, and—to the discomfort of physicists who prefer the multiple dimensions of string theory to explain the whole through its mathematically imagined parts— the divine.^[7]

Consider, similarly, how James Madison, writing as Publius, revealed that politics is never far from considerations of metaphysics. In *Federalist* 37, the prosaic-seeming topic of "the proper line of partition between the authority of the general and that of the State governments," leads into a profound reflection on the limits of wisdom, and the need to moderate our "hopes from the efforts of human sagacity." Institutional devices may help to secure the conditions for human excellence, but we cannot expect too much from an attempt "to contemplate and discriminate objects extensive and complicated in their nature." Indeed, Publius remarks on the obscurity that separates "unorganized matter" from vegetable and animal life, and notes that "the most acute metaphysical philosophers" have been challenged to delineate the precise "faculties of the mind," which include sense, perception, judgment, desire, volition, memory, and imagination.

What is the point of Publius's lofty and seemingly apolitical ruminations? Perhaps this: If self-government is always an activity rather than an accomplishment, and if human certainty about the highest matters will always be subject to the "indistinctness of the object, imperfection of the organ of conception, [and] inadequateness of the vehicle of ideas," then the republican project may require ongoing *intellectual* activity as well. To be sure, stability of the government necessitates that the people "venerate the Constitution by removing it from their grasp [and] elevating it above their factious passions and interests."^[8] At the same time, however, must there not always be some few who attend to first principles? "Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm," as Publius says elsewhere, but enlightened scholars of liberty must always be, if not at the helm, at least somewhere aboard the ship of state. Every regime must retain some "metaphysical philosophers" who reflect on those subjects "which puzzle the greatest adepts in political science."

Since Straussian political philosophers have generally abjured this responsibility, others have eagerly stepped into the breach. The current debates about the intersection of reality, time, being, mind, and consciousness occur almost entirely between theoretical physicists and, occasionally, professors in analytic philosophy. Often enough they occur solely *within* the community of theoretical physicists. Already disposed to hubris, the physicists can cite at least some empirical (experiential) basis for their views, and thus

frequently disdain the philosophers' focus on concepts and definitions. Modern-day heirs of Plato and Aristotle should be ashamed of themselves for voluntarily opting out of these conversations; content merely to sit on the bleachers, to the degree that they are paying attention at all. Would it not be more productive, more interesting, more...*Socratic*...to engage these (literally) universal questions, rather than publish yet another monograph on Tocqueville—as worthy as that eminent author is of study? Is there nothing more for political philosophers to learn or to say about the nature of the physical world, the nature of nature? Merely because the ominous shadow of Heidegger lingers over the words “being” (“Sein”) and “time” (“Zeit”), these topics—topics at the heart of the thought of Plato and Aristotle—cannot be deemed off-limits or inappropriate.

To make our boldest claim, we assert that not only must Straussians—along with other like-minded defenders of political philosophy—move off the sidelines, they must recruit, direct, and become students of all the disciplines. If Straussian political theorists lack confidence to engage all disciplines, any claims to hierarchy (within both knowledge and the cosmos) are essentially fraudulent. Strauss described political philosophy as the architectonic science. If the votaries of political philosophy are unable or unwilling to support that claim, who can fault a modern day Aristophanes who would call the enterprise a hustle?

Moreover, natural science needs the architectonic discipline.^[9] What better explains the descent of theoretical physics into string theory's hunt for “a theory of everything” if not the intense desire to know, trapped in a web of ossified ideas which demand reductionist explanations of phenomena, even where they cannot be shown apart from their mathematical consistency. Natural science must be advised by rational political thought, by philosophy, or it will be trapped in its own methodological dogmas, such as those of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. Worse, it remains at risk for misuse or abuse against which the perversions of the 20th Century will pale. What began with Descartes and Bacon as the conquest of matter now very much concerns the future of the fundamentally and intangibly human. Not just quantum physics, but also biology (in the form of evolutionary psychology and genetic engineering), as well as information science in the pursuit of artificial intelligence, have become unmistakably moral and metaphysical enterprises. For example,

- Theoretical physics, and its alternatives such as string theory and quantum loop gravity, involve basic questions of time and being.
- Artificial intelligence requires understanding of thought, and thus life.
- Evolutionary psychology, genetics, and a variety of questions touching on IQ demand clarification of the permanent human nature in a changing human race.

These areas of research are proceeding at a breathtaking pace. Their implications are momentous. If Straussians will not advise adequately on these matters—which means first *learning* about them—then others less adequate (and perhaps less benign) assuredly will.

Anecdotal reports indicate that the new generation of students introduced to Straussian thought are bored with what has become a pantomime of serious inquiry consisting primarily of cloistered and increasingly self-referential examination of texts. Straussians appear to them like Swift's professors of the academy of Lagado who had spent “eight years upon a project for extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers” and claimed that in eight years more, they should be able to “supply the gardens with sunshine.” This young generation senses no further sunbeams will be forthcoming from old books alone. They are, rightly, interested in questions raised by modernity's almost miraculous collection of data and technology. They are losing interest in teachers who are unstudied in the

rapid changes in science.

Gifted students who seek alternatives to the dispiriting radicalism and postmodernism on campus may look to classical philosophy for an alternative. But can they find there what they seek? Under the pressure to conform to the demands of post-modernists and Marxists on campus, these students, feeling helpless to address an increasingly aggressive and often violent ideologies of oppression and intersectionality, are not content to drift in eddies of esotericism. In the absence of Straussian teachers who speak to them with familiarity with the science and technology, they will turn to other teachers; and there can be no assurance those guides will be distinguished by the moderation and sobriety that characterizes classical political rationalism.

Professor Rovelli, the theoretical physicist who reads Aristotle, observes:

“Philosophers have tools and skills that physics needs, but do not belong to the physicists training: conceptual analysis, attention to ambiguity, accuracy of expression, the ability to detect gaps in standard arguments, to devise radically new perspectives, to spot conceptual weak points, and to seek out alternative conceptual explanations....

Philosophy provides guidance how research must be done. Not because philosophy can offer a final word about the right methodology of science (contrary to the philosophical stance of Weinberg and Hawking). But because the scientists who deny the role of philosophy in the advancement of science are those who think they have already found the final methodology, they have already exhausted and answered all methodological questions. They are consequently less open to the conceptual flexibility needed to go ahead. They are the ones trapped in the ideology of their time....

Just as the best science listens keenly to philosophy, so the best philosophy will listen keenly to science. This has certainly been so in the past: from Aristotle and Plato, to Descartes and Hume, Kant and Hegel, Husserl and Lewis, the best philosophy has always been closely tuned into science. No great philosopher of the past would ever have thought for a moment of not taking seriously the knowledge of the world offered by the science of their times.”^[10]

Rovelli rightly argues that science and philosophy need each other to flourish. We would go further and say that they need each other to survive. To defend political philosophy means perpetually to assert its relevance and worth against the claims of religion—those universal human impulses toward the intelligible divine and the revealed divine that are coeval with human longing for eternity.

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas—after the pattern of Islamic falsafa—attempted to reconcile philosophy with Christianity. That medieval solution was appropriate when revealed religion dominated almost every aspect of life. Today, Rome has been replaced by Silicon Valley. Apart from a receding minority of orthodox believers, religion now takes the form of scientism—a degraded expression of modern science that seeks salvation through the singularity. Political philosophers, by taking the excavation begun by Strauss and applying its skeptical inquiry to the edifice of accumulated modern science, must restore the proper understanding of the physical and biological sciences.

ENDNOTES

^[1]

We set aside for the purposes of this essay Jewish, Islamic, and Christian thinkers who approach the ancients through various mediaeval texts with a primarily theological orientation.

^[2]

Hans Jonas exposed the similarities of gnostic dualism and the contradictions of the

mind-body dualism that characterizes idealist epistemology and modern physics. In his essay, "Life, Death and the Body in the Theory of Being," on the severing of *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter), he wrote:

"But is there not here a contradiction? Has not the discrimination of the lifeless and the living first made possible the distinct articulation of what is peculiar to life? And has this not benefitted the "spirit," which as it were drew itself what there was of life in the universe and concentrated it within itself as "consciousness"? If matter was left dead on one side, then surely consciousness, brought into relief against it on the other side and becoming heir to all animalistic vitality, should be the repository, the distillate of life? But life does not bear distillation; it is somewhere between the purified aspects—in the concretion. The abstractions themselves do not live. In truth, we repeat, pure consciousness is as little alive as pure matter, standing over against it—and, by the same token, as little, mortal. It lives as departed spirits live and cannot understand the world anymore. To it the world is dead as it is dead to the world."

[3]

Eugene Miller, *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, 91.

[4]

Peter Berkowitz, [reviewing Catherine and Michael Zuckert's *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*](#), RealClearPolitics, August 16, 2014:

[5]

Journal of American Philosophical Association, Spring, 2015. For political philosophers interested in an introduction to modern physics, Rovelli's short, elegant books are an excellent beginning. Moreover, unlike most of his colleagues, Rovelli appreciates the importance of philosophy for physics.

[6]

Survival trends toward either (i) the power to out-breed the environment's ravages and (ii) the power to understand the environment sufficiently to mitigate its ravages. If survival is written in the architecture of matter and energy which make up living things—which are part of all things—there is reason to suppose that understanding is as well.

[7]

"I would say that Aristotle teaches revelation as much as any Christian theologian — in his own way. If you read the treatise *On the Soul* everything comes down in the end to the problem of the agent intellect, which absolutely cannot be explained." Harry V. Jaffa, ["Remarks at Rosary College."](#)

[8]

Charles R. Kesler, *Saving the Revolution*, p. 39.

[9]

The objection may be made that the ever increasing accumulation of scientific data permanently bars a competent understanding of the whole. Each discipline has its experts and indeed sub-experts whose work is inescapably recondite. No person can reasonably suggest they are competent to critique theoretical physics and, say, biochemistry. But as final judges of their own subjects (and issuing their own credentials), such experts become ripe for corruption. The allegedly insuperable complexity of modernity is the despotic claim made jointly on behalf of administrative bureaucracy and technocratic elitism. It is, at bottom, indistinguishable from spurious claim of the Sophists, who asserted their expertise in "the ruling arts" of rhetoric and persuasion. For Aristotle, the argument on behalf of political philosophy as the guiding discipline did not require the philosopher to be a master shipwright or bronze-worker;

but only to ensure that the development of technology is not left to the interests of shipwrights and metalworkers. The extreme specialization of the sciences today, and the high level of formal training needed to master certain fields, does represent a challenge to political philosophy—but it is one that can be met by seriously examining the experiences and opinions in each field. Everything is unintelligible to the uncurious.

[10]

“[Physics Needs Philosophy / Philosophy Needs Physics](#),” *Scientific American*, July 18, 2018.



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